

## CHAPTER V

### THE GOVERNMENT'S DECISION

June. IT was on the 7th June that the new Dardanelles Committee<sup>1</sup> at last assembled to reopen the discussion begun by their predecessors on the 14th May, as to whether the Gallipoli operations were to be continued or abandoned.

Some days before the meeting two papers had been sent to the members of the Committee: one written by Lord Kitchener, the other by Mr. Churchill.

Lord Kitchener's memorandum, dated the 28th May, laid down the general principle that the position in France and Flanders must not be endangered, nor the safety of the United Kingdom jeopardized, by any secondary operations, no matter how important. But he added that this principle need not preclude the continuation of operations elsewhere, should it be found that no decisive results could be obtained on the Western front, and that the army in that theatre was forced to adopt a purely defensive policy.

As regards the Gallipoli campaign, Lord Kitchener's memorandum outlined once again the three alternative courses of action discussed on the 14th May:

- (1) To abandon the enterprise and withdraw from the peninsula;
- (2) To send out large reinforcements and seek an immediate decision;
- (3) To continue to push on gradually and make such progress as might be possible without any considerable increase to Sir Ian Hamilton's strength.

<sup>1</sup> The members of the new Government's Dardanelles Committee, as first appointed, were: Mr. Asquith, Lords Lansdowne, Curzon, Crewe, Kitchener and Selborne, Sir Edward Grey, Messrs. Balfour, Lloyd George, Bonar Law, McKenna and Winston Churchill. Mr. Balfour had succeeded Mr. Churchill in the new Ministry as First Lord of the Admiralty, and Mr. Churchill was now Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. Sir Edward Carson became a member of the Dardanelles Committee in August, after the Suvla landing.

Lord Kitchener argued that the consequences of withdrawal June. would be so disastrous that such a step could only be justified as the sole means of avoiding an even greater catastrophe. Not only would the actual operation be so difficult that it might lead to a serious military disaster. All hope of the Balkan States joining the Entente would be lost; Germany would gain Constantinople; Great Britain would be abandoning a most important strategic position which Australian and New Zealand contingents had helped to win at heavy cost; and a serious blow would be struck at British prestige throughout the Moslem world.

As regards the second alternative, the memorandum suggested that the troops and ammunition asked for by Sir Ian Hamilton could not be made available. Moreover, Lord Kitchener was doubtful whether such increased forces would really ensure success.

Lord Kitchener urged, however, that there was much to be said in favour of the third course. It would avoid an immediate blow to British prestige and keep the door open for Balkan intervention. It would retain our hold on a position of great strategic importance, and distract Turkish attention from Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Caucasus. There was even the possibility that the Turks might be unable to maintain their resistance on the present scale, and that, in this case, our troops would be able to advance. This third alternative—in effect a compromise—was the course which Lord Kitchener favoured on the 28th May. But on the 7th June, when the Committee at last met, he had already changed his mind.

Mr. Churchill's paper, dated the 1st June, was an urgent plea for the second alternative—a vigorous effort in Gallipoli. He argued that the Germans had not the power, nor could they have it during the next three months, to break the Allied line in the West. On the other hand, he felt more doubtful than ever of the Entente's ability to break the German line; at an utterly disproportionate cost the line would merely be bent, and no strategic results could be obtained in France from an advance of three or four miles. A condition of stalemate had in fact supervened on the Western front; it would probably continue for some time; and he deprecated strongly an impatient renewal of the offensive in that theatre.

In these circumstances, and as he was convinced that England was safe from invasion, Mr. Churchill urged that Sir Ian Hamilton could and should be supplied with all the troops he needed for an early success in Gallipoli. The "comparatively small quantities" of high-explosive shell needed for an

June, advance in that theatre were already available; and an advance of three or four miles on the peninsula would produce strategic results of a decisive character. With the capture of Kilid Bahr the Straits would be opened and the Turco-German fleet destroyed. Russia could then co-operate in an attack on Constantinople; the whole of the Balkans would join the Entente; and Turkey would be driven out of the war. Where else in all the theatres of the war could we look during the next three months for results of this extraordinary character?

Mr. Churchill pleaded that there was no time to lose. The sooner the Gallipoli campaign was finished, the sooner everything could again, if desired, be concentrated on the Western front. If we delayed longer in sending the necessary reinforcements, or sent them piecemeal, we should in the end have to send all, and more than all, that were now asked for, and run the risk of fighting the whole Turkish army in relays.

Mr. Churchill's arguments probably did not overstate either the difficulties of an offensive in France or the advantages offered by a successful advance in Gallipoli. In France, at the Battle of Aubers Ridge, 11,000 casualties had been incurred without the gain of a single yard of ground. Plenty of good wire, in combination with machine guns under good cover, supported by heavy artillery which counter-batteries could not silence, constituted a fortress in the field which could not be overcome by the means then at the disposal of the British. The Battle of Festubert had taught the same lesson. There, on one corps front alone, despite the expenditure of over 10,000 rounds of gun ammunition in the preliminary bombardment, nearly 17,000 casualties, or roughly 40 per cent of the numbers actually engaged, had been sustained by the British without any compensating gain. The French, too, had suffered extravagant losses in their recent offensives; between the 15th May and the 18th June the casualties of the French Tenth Army alone had exceeded 100,000. Sir Ian Hamilton, it is true, had little more to show for all his heavy losses in the three battles of Krithia. But the army in Gallipoli had been fighting with less than one-third of the pre-war proportion of artillery, and there was already no doubt that with howitzers and ammunition in the proportion at present available for British formations in France it would long since have opened the Narrows.

The heavy losses in France, out of all proportion to the results achieved, were beginning to tell their tale. By the 7th June Lord Kitchener himself was no longer opposed, as he had been on the 28th May, to the despatch of large rein-

forcements to Gallipoli. The absence of any ray of light on June. The drab situation in France and Flanders, coupled no doubt with Mr. Churchill's powerful advocacy, had again led to his asking Sir Ian Hamilton whether the addition of three more divisions would enable him to finish the Dardanelles campaign; and Sir Ian Hamilton's reply,<sup>1</sup> which arrived on the morning of the 7th, seems to have determined the War Secretary's attitude.

When, therefore, the Committee assembled on the 7th June, Lord Kitchener pronounced himself in favour of vigorous action at the Dardanelles. He urged that Sir Ian Hamilton should be given the troops he had asked for on the 17th May, and he announced that he could not remain responsible for the conduct of the war if it were decided to abandon the peninsula.

With this clear guidance the Committee then and there decided to send out the three remaining divisions of the First New Army, "with a view to an assault in the second week of July." They further decided to strengthen the Eastern Mediterranean fleet with a number of naval units less vulnerable to submarine attack than those already under Admiral de Robeck's command. These decisions were telegraphed to Sir Ian Hamilton immediately after the conference.

Counting the 52nd Division, a portion of which had already arrived, this promise would provide Sir Ian Hamilton with all the troops he had asked for on the 17th May, and, though the long delay had increased his difficulties, he felt it useless to ask for anything more. Little did he realize that in the course of the next few days the Government's war policy would begin to veer still more in the direction of the Dardanelles, and that at the end of July—when the offer was too late to be of value—they would offer him every man and gun he could use.

A recognition of this eleventh-hour change of policy is essential to a true understanding of the importance finally attached by the Government to the August operations in Gallipoli. Up to the 7th June the Gallipoli enterprise had laboured under the disadvantages of its ill-considered conception. The troops and ammunition originally allotted to it had borne no relation to its needs, but only to the numbers and amounts that could be spared from France without prejudicing offensive operations in that theatre or offending the French High Command. Opinion at British G.H.Q. in France was firmly opposed to "side-shows"; this opinion was widely shared in London, and in many influential quarters every reinforcement sent to the Mediterranean had been begrudged as

<sup>1</sup> See page 54.

June, an unjustifiable diversion of strength from "the only theatre" where a final victory was possible". On the 7th June the Government's decision to send three divisions to Gallipoli was principally due to the hope of putting a speedy end to an enterprise which was proving an unwelcome drain upon their resources. But from that date the tide of opinion rose ever higher in favour of the Dardanelles. By the end of June Gallipoli was at last recognized as the "only theatre with a prospect of early important success", and the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, hitherto treated like an illegitimate child, was for a few short weeks to enjoy the position of a favoured son and heir.

This sudden change of fortune was due in great measure to Mr. Churchill. Four days after the meeting on the 7th June he wrote to the Dardanelles Committee urging that as a matter of prudence a larger force should be sent to Gallipoli. He pointed out that the troops already on the peninsula were so weak and exhausted by their continued efforts that they could not be expected to provide many men for the new attack. He urged that Sir Ian Hamilton should be provided with two additional divisions (the 53rd and 54th Territorial) for his coming offensive, or a total of five reinforcing divisions in all,<sup>1</sup> in addition to every other man that could be spared for a short time from England or Egypt.

Again, on the 15th June, in a letter to Lord Kitchener, Mr. Churchill renewed his efforts to secure a stronger force for the coming battle:

Suppose the first three divisions do a great deal, but not all, and after three or four days' fighting are brought to a standstill with 10,000 or 15,000 casualties. . . . Suppose two or three fresh divisions are then needed to carry the business through to complete success, and suppose there is nothing nearer than England, which means a month's delay, by the end of which you would have to begin all over again. There is my fear.

This letter Mr. Churchill followed up with a further memorandum for the Government, dealing with the relation of the Gallipoli campaign to the whole field of the war. He pointed out that since April 1915 the French and British between them had lost over 300,000 men on the Western front, mostly in offensive action, and that, as a result, they had recovered perhaps eight square miles of the 10,500 square miles of France and Belgium in German possession. He argued that even if all the

<sup>1</sup> Including the 52nd Division, the total would actually be six, but the 52nd Division would be wanted for service immediately on arrival, and it was not included in these calculations.

troops now in the Dardanelles had been able to assist the June. French they would not have been sufficient to make a decisive change in the situation on the Western front, or to do more than produce casualties over a wider area.

As for the future, he held that it would be imprudent to count on the Central Powers having less than six million men under arms in 1916, plus another half a million Turks if that country had not been defeated in the meantime. Against these numbers, Britain, owing to shortage of rifles, would probably only be able to place  $1\frac{1}{2}$  millions in the field, and Italy not more than a million. France, who at present had two millions in the field, with another million behind them, had already reached her maximum, and would be unable to increase that number. Russia alone offered the means of providing the Allies with the numerical preponderance which they would require to wear down the Central Powers. The essential course for Britain, therefore, was to re-equip Russia and rally the Balkan States against Austria and Turkey; and this could best be done by forcing the Straits and capturing Constantinople.

"Here is the prize," Mr. Churchill concluded, "and the only prize, which lies within reach this year. It can certainly be won without unreasonable expense, and within a comparatively short time. But we must act now, and on a scale which makes speedy success certain."

The weight of these arguments was increased by the latest news from France. There, on the 15th June, at the Second Action of Givenchy, British troops had again lost between 40, and 50 per cent of their numbers in a vain attempt to storm the German line.<sup>1</sup> From Russia, too, the news was increasingly disquieting. The Russian army in Galicia had again retired; Lemberg was threatened, and the state of the Russian ammunition supply was deplorable. The Dardanelles seemed to offer the only chance of assisting a stricken Ally.

In these circumstances, the question of offering more troops to Sir Ian Hamilton was discussed by the Dardanelles Committee on the 17th June. The general feeling of the meeting was in favour of this course, and Lord Kitchener stated that if the transport problem could be solved he would not limit the number to two extra divisions.

But transportation was a real difficulty. According to the figures then available, the last of the three new divisions already promised could not assemble at Mudros till the 20th August, or

<sup>1</sup> In this action, fought on 15th/16th June, at the request of the French, to assist their attack further south, the British had 3,000 casualties, most of them in six battalions.

June, six weeks later than the date originally anticipated. At a similar rate of progress it seemed doubtful if a fifth division could arrive before the end of October, and to delay the attack till then was obviously out of the question. The first essential, therefore, was to accelerate the passage of the troops already promised, and, with this object, it was decided to accept the risks entailed and to charter as transports the mammoth liners *Aquitania*, *Mauretania*<sup>1</sup> and *Olympic*, each of which could carry from six to seven battalions.

The meeting postponed any decision with regard to the despatch of more troops to the Dardanelles till the result of this acceleration was known, but on the 21st June it became clear that the third new division could arrive by the 28th July. Lord Kitchener telegraphed this news to Sir Ian Hamilton, and asked if he needed a fourth division. Sir Ian replied that he did not feel justified in refusing a reinforcement which, considering the uncertainties of war, might just be needed to turn the scale.

These telegrams synchronized with an important development in France. There it was gradually becoming clear that neither the men nor the munitions for a successful attack in the West would be forthcoming till the spring of 1916, and on the 23rd June Sir Douglas Haig urged upon Sir John French, that, in the existing state of our resources it was of little use to make plans for further offensives in France. The same conclusion had been reached at a conference of the French and British Munition Ministers held at Boulogne three days earlier. That conference agreed that the German trenches could not be captured without a far larger proportion of heavy guns and howitzers than the Entente at present possessed. The right proportion, the conference decided, would be about one heavy or medium gun or howitzer to every two field guns; yet in June 1915 the British army had only a proportion of one to twenty, and even with the French it was only one to four. The deficiency of gun ammunition was on a similar scale, and it was plain that no great improvement on the present rate of production would be possible for twelve months.

These considerations induced Lord Kitchener to go one step further. At this moment 24 British divisions were serving on the Western front. Thirteen more were to go there before the end of September, and another twelve before the end of the year. By April 1916 the British army in France would consist of 70 divisions, and Lord Kitchener was convinced that the despatch of two more to Gallipoli would make little difference

<sup>1</sup> The *Mauretania* had already been used once, with some misgiving, to convey a brigade of the 52nd Division to Mudros.

to Sir John French, more especially as they would both be taken June. from the Home Defence forces and not from the divisions already ear-marked for France.

Lord Kitchener, moreover, was by this time strongly opposed to any early resumption of the offensive on the Western front. "Such an attack," he said on the 25th June, "before an adequate supply of guns and high-explosive shell can be provided, would only result in heavy casualties and the capture of another turnip field." He therefore determined to curtail the supply of ammunition for Sir John French's army for a fortnight in order to swell the amounts available for the coming attack on the peninsula; and, having now heard from the transport authorities that a fourth division could reach Gallipoli about the beginning of August, he telegraphed to Sir Ian Hamilton to ask if he wanted a fifth.

Three days later, on the evening of the 28th June, while the action of Gully Ravine<sup>1</sup> was raging at Helles, Sir Ian Hamilton replied to this telegram in the affirmative, and on the 5th July. Lord Kitchener agreed that five divisions in all should be sent to Gallipoli. He informed the Government at the same time that in case of necessity he would also allow Sir Ian Hamilton to call upon Sir John Maxwell, commanding the Egyptian garrison, for 15,000 British and Indian troops from Egypt.<sup>2</sup> But neither of these officers was informed of this intention till the latter end of July.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the weight of the burden that rested on Lord Kitchener's shoulders in deciding the rival claims of the Western and Eastern theatres. By this time, it is true, the British military authorities in France had reached the conclusion that the guns and ammunition required for a successful offensive on the Western front could not be available till the spring of 1916. They maintained that until that time it would be preferable, "whatever the general situation, to remain on the active defensive in the Western theatre of war".<sup>3</sup> But these opinions were not shared by the French. General Joffre still believed that a supreme effort in France would end the war before the coming winter, and was using all his influence to bring Lord Kitchener to this point of view.

On the night of the 5th July, Mr. Asquith, Lord Kitchener and Mr. Balfour crossed to Calais and attended a conference

<sup>1</sup> See Chapter VII.

<sup>2</sup> The Government learnt on 5th July that the *Aquitania*, carrying six battalions and the headquarters of the 11th Division, had narrowly missed destruction by a German submarine off Ushant; but their resolution to accept the risk involved by the use of these large vessels was unshaken.

<sup>3</sup> "Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1915", Vol. II. p. 117.



July, next morning with MM. Viviani, Delcassé and Millerand, General Joffre, and Sir John French. At this conference, after an earlier interview with General Joffre, Lord Kitchener supported the French general's contention that, for motives bound up with the psychology of the French army and people, a general offensive on the Western front could not be postponed till the spring of 1916, despite the strong military reasons in favour of such a delay. The conference finally agreed. At an Allied Military Conference held next day at Chantilly the military problem was discussed, and it was somewhat vaguely arranged that the French "should assume the offensive at the earliest possible date; that the British Expeditionary Force should lend the utmost assistance to the French operations under conditions to be framed as soon as possible, and that the Belgian army should co-operate with the means at its disposal".<sup>1</sup> The actual month in which this offensive should begin was not mentioned; but at a further meeting between Sir John French and General Joffre at St. Omer on the 11th July, Sir John yielded to Joffre's pressure and promised to co-operate with the French in a major operation to be launched at the end of August.

This promise naturally affected for a moment the amount of ammunition that could be spared for Gallipoli;<sup>2</sup> but Lord Kitchener's anxieties were now increased by the news of terrific events on Germany's Eastern frontier. There, on the 13th July, the main Austro-German offensive was launched against the Russians, and every day added a terrible page to the story of Russia's disasters.

This was the situation that finally led the British Government to strain every nerve to bring the Dardanelles campaign to a speedy and victorious conclusion. Two reasons influenced this decision. If Russia were to be saved, an immediate effort must be made to come to her assistance, and the opening of the Dardanelles seemed to offer the only method of affording this help. The second reason was equally strong. Though the Western front was for the moment safe from German aggression, it was possible that, with the sudden collapse of the Russians, large numbers of German divisions might soon be returning westwards and a gigantic offensive inaugurated to break the Allied line. The sooner the Gallipoli campaign was finished the sooner could Sir Ian Hamilton's forces be brought home, if required, to strengthen the Western front.

The cumulative effect of these considerations broke down

<sup>1</sup> French Official Account, Tome iii., Annexes ii. No. 860.

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter VII.

the last strands of opposition. On the 28th July Lord July. Kitchener telegraphed to Sir Ian Hamilton:

We should like to hear from you after considering your plans whether there is anything further in the way of personnel, guns or ammunition we can send you, as we are most anxious to give you everything you can possibly require and use. As regards ammunition, we have had to stop supplying France to give you the full output, which will be continued as long as possible. In the short time available before the bad weather intervenes the Dardanelles operations are now of the highest importance.<sup>1</sup>

All thoughts in ministerial circles were now directed eastwards, and every hope was centred on the Dardanelles. Strenuous efforts had already been made to repair the ravages of over-long delay, and the speed with which the reinforcements of men, guns and ammunition were despatched from England to Gallipoli must rank as one of the outstanding triumphs of British improvisation in the course of the Great War. Nowhere can a clearer picture be found of Britain's rapid military expansion and her supreme naval power than in the record of July 1915. Eleven months earlier, in August 1914, the British nation, recking little of war, had taken pride in the fact that four divisions of the original Expeditionary Force had been promptly and safely despatched to the opposite side of the Channel. Now, with 24 British and Indian divisions already in France, with another 25 preparing to go there before the end of the year, and with four British and two Australian and New Zealand divisions in Gallipoli, five more divisions and many thousands of drafts had been embarked in six weeks for their 3,000 miles' voyage to the Dardanelles—a vast undertaking which, despite the efforts of hostile submarines in the English Channel and the Ægean, was completed without a casualty.

But it was Britain alone who was making this fresh effort to open the Dardanelles, and the situation at the end of July 1915 reveals the striking contrast between the methods of waging war adopted by the contesting Powers. On the one hand, singleness of purpose was carrying the Central Powers from strength to strength; on the other, divided counsels were jeopardizing the chances of the Entente. While Germany stood on the defensive in the West, the Austro-German forces were dealing the Russian armies blow after blow, and the fall

<sup>1</sup> Sir Ian Hamilton answered this message by referring to his telegram of 13th July (see Chapter X.), and more high-explosive and two batteries of 4.5-inch howitzers were thereupon sent to Marseilles for immediate shipment to Gallipoli.

of Warsaw was imminent. In the case of the Entente, Italy, at war with Austria since the 21st May, had preferred to launch an offensive of her own. Britain was striving—almost single-handed—to open the Dardanelles; and although the French Government at last seemed ready to support a greater effort in that theatre, General Joffre was exerting his immense influence to stake everything on an offensive on the Western front.

The British Government's decision to use a large force in Gallipoli had, moreover, come a month too late, and the new effort was to end in disappointment. The united strength of the fresh troops so lavishly promised at last, could not be exerted till the second week in August. It was not possible for Sir Ian Hamilton to postpone all operations till reinforcements arrived, and, as will be seen in a subsequent chapter, just as in April and May achievement had failed to reap its reward for lack of an adequate reserve,<sup>1</sup> so in the first fortnight of July the larap of victory, once again rekindled by the troops already on the peninsula, was again to flicker out for want of oil. The enemy was again to be given time to recover his balance; and the last half of July was to witness the despatch of heavy reinforcements for the Turks, and the steady wasting away from battle casualties and disease of the British and French troops already ashore. In August a force of thirteen divisions, more than twice the strength of the original British Expeditionary Force in France, was to miss by a narrow margin the accomplishment of a task which a month earlier would have offered half the difficulty.

<sup>1</sup> "On the 25th April, on the 28th April, and again on the 8th May we "missed great successes for lack of just one more division to push in at the "critical moment." Extract from a General Staff memorandum written at G.H.Q. on 23rd June.